

VI.—On the Specific Validity of *Ploceus megarhynchus* Hume.

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(Plate I.)

THE large Indian Weaver-bird described by A. O. Hume as *Ploceus megarhynchus* has been united by Dr. R. B. Sharpe in the 'Catalogue of Birds,' and by Mr. E. W. Oates in the 'Fauna of British India,' with the eastern form of the Baya Weaver-bird, although this appellation was bestowed by Mr. Hume on what he considered to be a distinct species. Mr. Hume's types, obtained from Kaladoongi, below Naini Tal, are in the British Museum, and a recent examination of these specimens has fully confirmed me in the view that I previously held of the specific distinctness of *Ploceus megarhynchus* and *P. baya*.

In July 1899 I exhibited to the Asiatic Society two living specimens of a large Weaver which I had recently obtained for the Indian Museum from our well-known Calcutta dealer in animals, Mr. W. Rutledge, of Entally. To these birds, considering them to represent an undescribed form of *Ploceus*, I gave the name of *Ploceus rutledgii*, and briefly diagnosed the species as similar to the male of *P. baya* in breeding-plumage, but easily distinguishable by the larger size and the entirely yellow under surface ('Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal,' July 1899, p. 77). As one of the birds was more stoutly built than the other, and was constantly singing and weaving grass into the wire of the cage, I thought that the two specimens were possibly a pair, the more so as some of the Weavers show very little sexual difference in plumage. As time went on, however, the birds (which, according to Mr. Rutledge's stipulation, I had kept alive) began to change into undress plumage, and in this dress much resembled the corresponding phase of our common Weaver of this district, which, in the British Museum Catalogue, is called *P. atrigula*. Their colour was, however, darker and more uniform, and closely corresponded with that of Mr. Hume's bird. I had noticed that their great size was a point of resemblance to *P. megarhynchus*, and the

assumption of a similar plumage left in my mind no doubt as to their identity. To that little-known form I accordingly referred them in a paper entitled "Notes on *Ploceidæ*," published in the 'Journal of the Asiatic Society' (vol. lxxviii. pt. ii. 1899). Therein I gave a fuller description of the summer plumage, which the birds had then assumed, taken from them when in full colour, which I quote below:—

"General colour bright yellow (brightest on head and dull and impure on rump), with the following exceptions:—lores, round the eye below, and ear-coverts dark brown; a dull-black patch on each side of the breast before the shoulder; nape and hind neck dull blackish brown; upper back, wings, and tail blackish brown, each feather edged, entirely or externally, with light brown, on the uppermost part of the back with yellow; under wing-coverts dirty white.

"Iris bright light brown; bill black, fleshy white at base; feet dark brownish fleshy, claws blackish horny."

I had a coloured drawing (Plate I. fig. A) of the finer bird made by one of the museum artists, A. C. Chowdhary, and took its measurements as well as I could. The length was about $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches, bill from gape about 0·8, wing about 3, tail about 2·1, and tarsus about 0·95.

The same bird, when out of summer plumage, had its portrait again taken (Plate I. fig. B). Both specimens survived the winter, and in due course reassumed their yellow garb, without the slightest alteration from that which they had worn when I first saw them; so that we may, I think, fairly conclude that captivity had not affected them in any way, and that the plumage is normal and definitely characteristic of the breeding male of the species. I am now quite convinced that both birds are males, as the second specimen has been singing and otherwise comporting itself in a more masculine manner than it did at first.

On visiting the British Museum, when in London last August, I was, by the kindness of Mr. W. R. Ogilvie Grant, enabled to inspect the series of *Ploceus atrigula*, and found that I could easily pick out therefrom the types of Mr. Hume's *P. megarhynchus*, so closely did their plumage correspond

with that which I had seen assumed by the living birds above mentioned when in undress. Mr. Rutledge had obtained these from Naini Tal, though no doubt they had not been captured there, but, like the types of *P. megarhynchus*, at a much lower elevation. The deadly nature of the climate of the Terai at the season when these birds are in full feather will, no doubt, account for the fact that the breeding-plumage has been hitherto unknown, since the species of *Ploceus*, at any rate when breeding, are very conspicuous wherever they occur.

It is possible, however, that this particular form is really rare, for the native from whom Mr. Rutledge procured the birds last year did not succeed in getting any to bring down to Calcutta this season. Mr. Rutledge had, moreover, never seen the bird before he received the two specimens which he sold the Museum, and his experience as a dealer in animals extends over forty years. This fact seems to dispose of the suggestion, which has been made to me by an eminent ornithologist, that the bird might possibly have been imported. Moreover, the present bird does not at all agree with the description of any African species, while in its winter plumage, as has been already said, it corresponds very closely with Hume's types of *Ploceus megarhynchus*, which it also resembles in size, as may be judged from the measurements above given.

It seems to me, therefore, obvious that Mr. Hume's *P. megarhynchus* is a good and valid species, easily distinguishable from all other Indian forms of *Ploceus* by the large preponderance of yellow in its coloration when in summer plumage, and to a less extent by its more uniformly stinted winter dress. Its large size is a less important character, as in this respect it is almost, if not quite, equalled by some specimens of the buff-breasted form which in the British Museum Catalogue is called *P. atrigula*. The application of the name *P. megarhynchus* to the latter bird by Mr. E. W. Oates in the 'Fauna of British India' is thus shown to be a mistake, and the question that now remains to be solved is the exact range of the large yellow species,

P. megarhynchus, for it can hardly be supposed to be confined to the Terai region below Naini Tal.

I append the synonymy and diagnosis of the species:—

PLOCEUS MEGARHYNCHUS. (Plate I.)

Ploceus megarhynchus Hume, Ibis, 1869, p. 357; 1871, pp. 36, 37: id. Stray Feathers, iii. 1875, pp. 153, 406, 407; vi. 1878, p. 400; viii. 1879, p. 106.

Ploceus atrigula Sharpe, Cat. Birds Brit. Mus. vol. xiii. (1890) p. 491 (part.).

Ploceus megarhynchus Oates, Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds, vol. ii. (1890) p. 177 (part.).

Ploceus rufledgii Finn, Proc. A. S. B., July 1899, p. 77.

Ploceus megarhynchus Finn, J. A. S. B. lxviii. pt. ii. pp. 250–252 (1899).

Mas in vestitu æstivo. Maxima ex parte corporis flavus; sed alis caudaque fuscis fulvo marginatis; neonon nuchâ atque maculâ pectorali utrinque sordidè nigris; capitis lateribus fusco lavatis maculam formantibus; rostro nigro, ad basin carneo-albo; iridibus castaneis; pedibus obscurè carnis.

Mas in vestitu hiemali. Brunneus, suprâ sparsim fusco-striatus; alis caudaque fuscis fulvo marginatis; gulâ pallidiore, abdomine cum crisso albo: rostro carneo-albo, culmine cum apice nigro.

Long. circ. 6·5 poll.; rostrum a rictu 0·8; ala a carpo 3; cauda circ. 2; tarsus circ. 0·9.

Obs. Similis *P. bayæ* atque *P. atrigulæ*, sed in vestitu æstivo colore flavo in totum corpus infra extenso, et plerumque statura majore facillimè distinguendus; in vestitu hiemali magnis *P. atrigulæ* exemplis persimilis, sed colore obscuriore, atque minus striato dignoscendus.

Habitat in saltibus subhimalayanis infra oppidum “Naini Tal” dictum.

EXPLANATION OF PLATE I.

Ploceus megarhynchus.

Fig. A. Male in summer plumage.

B. The same bird in undress plumage.

Both figures are taken from sketches made at Calcutta, from the living bird, by A. C. Chowdhary.



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B.

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PLOCEUS MEGARHYNCHUS.

Fig. A. Male in summer plumage. Fig. B. The same bird in undress plumage.